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THE HISTORY OF THE TELEGRAPH IN CALIFORNIA.

BY ALICE L. BATES.

Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph, completed his first line for the government and sent the well-known message, "What hath God wrought?" from Washington to Baltimore in 1844. The following year the line was opened for business and in 1846 New York and Philadelphia were connected by wire. Men were not slow to grasp the commercial importance of such an invention, and all over the country groups of financiers incorporated, sold stock and began the erection of lines. The next few years saw many of the important cities of the country connected by telegraphic communication.

The movement extended to the Far West, and in 1853, nine years after the first line was built, messages flashed between Marysville and San Francisco. Eight years later, in 1861, isolated California, whose only means of communication with the outside, hitherto, had been the slow, hazardous journey over the plains, across the Isthmus or around the Horn, was in close communication with the eastern coast, eight years before President Stanford drove the last gold spike in May, 1869, which connected the oceans with the first great transcontinental railway.

As early as July, 1853, some enterprising men succeeded in raising enough money to erect a wire on trees between some small towns in Nevada, and Grass Valley and Auburn in California, and were able to telegraph from one mining camp to the other. In September of the same year another short line was completed. This extended merely from the business quarters of San Francisco, from the first office on Telegraph Hill to the entrance of the bay, and was used only for signaling vessels. It was built and controlled by Sweeney and Baugh of the Merchants' Exchange. The first message was sent September 11, 1853, and the formal opening took place ten days later.

The following month October 24, 1853, the first telegraph line that later became part of the system of the state was completed. The previous year a group of men, led by Oliver C. Allen and Clark Burnham of New York, formed a company known as the California Telegraph Company to build a line from San Francisco to Marysville. The proposed route was to go south to San Jose, to Stockton,

and thence north to Sacramento and Marysville. A franchise was granted by the Legislature of the state May 3, 1852, for a term of fifteen years, with the following provisions: the work was to be completed before November 1, 1853, and after three years 3 per cent of the net profits was to go to the state.

The new project met with many misfortunes. There was a disastrous fire and the money for the company did not materialize. The work of the erection of the poles, which began September 28, 1852, was soon abandoned. In a few months, however, the company was reorganized under the name of the California State Telegraph Company, with W. B. Ranson as president. New capital was subscribed, the services of W. M. Rockwell, a prominent hardware merchant, was secured as contractor for the construction of the line, and every effort was made to complete the task before the expiration of the franchise.

There were many delays, but September 13, 1853, with only six weeks before them, a party of six men under James Gamble, who later became one of the foremost men in telegraph circles of California, left San Francisco to string the wires. The pole men had a few days start.

An interesting account of the work is given in the "Californian" for April, 1881, by James Gamble himself, in an article entitled, "Early Reminiscences of the Telegraph on the Pacific Coast." Five to seven miles were wired every day. The fifth day out the party reached a ravine known as Canada Diablo near what is now Belmont. Mr. Gamble succeeded in connecting the wire with the office in San Francisco in the old City Hall and sent the first message over the line. San Jose was soon reached and the first regular office established. The work met with no great obstacles. Stockton was reached, then Sacramento and finally Marysville the 25th day of October, just six days before the limit set by the franchise.

Regular offices were opened in all the cities. Seventy-five cents was charged for every ten words on messages from San Francisco to San Jose, a distance of about fifty miles, and two dollars was the price asked between San Francisco and the other cities. There was soon plenty of work and the new venture proved a great financial success.

Many amusing incidents are told of the curiosity with which the people viewed the telegraph; for the same excitement was created here as elsewhere in United States by the wonderful instrument. Some curious spectators thought that the messages were being carried over the wire and tried to catch glimpses of them as they were being carried along. Others believed the wire was hollow and the messages were being carried by an enchanted spirit. The Indians saw that the poles made a cross and conceived the idea that the

Yankees were fencing in the country with crosses to keep the devil out.

Within two years, in 1855, monthly dividends of one per cent were declared on the stock of the company. This gave great impetus to the building of new lines and various companies organized and began work. In 1854 the Alta Telegraph Company built a line connecting Nevada City and Sacramento by way of Auburn and Placerville, and in 1856 extended its line direct to San Francisco by laying two cables, one at the straits at Benicia and the other across the bay at Oakland and San Francisco. The cables proved very unsatisfactory and a line was built around the bay. This infringed upon the rights of the California State Telegraph Company, and after a few years of litigation, the Alta Telegraph Company became merged with its rival company. In 1856 the Northern California Telegraph Company was formed and built a line from Marysville as far north as Eureka.

As early as 1858 the idea of a transcontinental line was projected, and two rival companies started work. The Pacific Atlantic Company pushed its lines southward along the Butterfield overland route via San Jose and reached Los Angeles in 1860 and stopped work. A central line started by the Placerville Humboldt Company reached Carson City in the spring of 1859, and soon afterwards Ft. Churchill. To stimulate the effort the California Legislature offered \$6000 a year to the company who would be the first to complete the overland line, but neither company succeeded, and both became merged with the California State Telegraph Company.

In the meanwhile the many eastern companies which had organized and built various lines were undergoing a process of consolidation. The Western Union Telegraph Company, by obtaining control of the patents of the Morse invention and the House printing machine, soon became the strongest rival in the field, and one by one most of the other companies leased their lines to the new company or else became merged with it.

One of the leading men of the Western Union at the time was Hiram Sibley, and to his wisdom and tireless energy belongs much of the credit for the building of the first line to the Pacific Coast. Mr. Sibley first presented the scheme to his own board of directors at Rochester, New York, but the risks were thought to be too hazardous to undertake, so the company refused to carry out the project. It was suggested, however, that the work might be undertaken by an outside organization in which the company might be represented. Then if the work failed, it would not seriously cripple the whole company, and this plan was carried out.

In 1860 Mr. Sibley applied to Congress for help in the undertaking. It was a very opportune time. The government realized the need of being in close touch with the western forts and the necessity

of keeping the whole country together, and in a very short time, June 16, 1860, a bill was passed "to facilitate communication between the Atlantic and Pacific States by electric telegraph." Congress was to grant an annual subsidy of \$40,000 for ten years and a quarter of a section of land for every fifteen miles of line. For this the telegraph company promised to send government messages free to the above amount, the rate of any message being limited to \$3 for every ten words.

Jeptha H. Wade, another prominent figure in the building of the new line, succeeded in consolidating the four lines in California and in obtaining a concession of \$100,000 from the state for the work. It was finally agreed that the California State Telegraph Company and the Western Union Company should extend their lines to Salt Lake and there unite. On January 11, 1861, the Pacific Telegraph Company was incorporated in Nebraska with a capital stock of \$1,000,000 to carry out the contract of the Western Union Company, while on the western coast the Overland Telegraph Company was organized in San Francisco with a capital stock of \$1,250,000 to carry out the obligation of the California State Telegraph Company.

The question of route was the first to be decided. This work was given to Edward Creighton, a well-known line builder, and it was his recommendation that finally led to the selection of the route April 12, 1861, from Omaha to Salt Lake via Fort Kearney, Laramie, South Pass, Forts Crittenden and Churchill, across the Sierra Nevada mountains to Sacramento and San Francisco. Mr. Creighton offered to take charge of the work of construction, so he was given the contract for building the eastern section, while Mr. James Gamble, who had done such efficient work in building the first line in California, was given charge of the work in the west. Two years was the time set by most people as the shortest time possible in which the work could be accomplished, but they had not reckoned with the western spirit or the western energy.

On July 4th, 1861, ground was broken for the erection of the first poles. To give some idea of the magnitude of the work, Mr. Reid says in his book "The Telegraph in America," nearly a thousand oxen were found necessary for the transportation of the camps, food, wire and poles. In California the work was divided into two sections. One started east from Carson City, Nevada, and the other worked west from Salt Lake. Mr. Stebbins took charge of the work from Salt Lake eastward, four hundred miles and Mr. Creighton the remaining seven hundred miles from Omaha.

It seems almost incredible that the gigantic task was completed in a little over four months, but such was the case. October 19th, the eastern section was completed, and five days later Mr. Gamble's

work was finished, and the first message flashed across the wire October 24, 1861.*

To his Excellency, the President, San Francisco, Cal.,
Washington, D. C. Oct. 24, 1861, 7:40 P.M.

I announce to you that the telegraph to California has this day been completed. May it be a bond of perpetuity between the states of the Atlantic and those of the Pacific.

(Signed) Horace W. Carpenter,
President Overland Telegraph Company.

In 1864 the Pacific Telegraph Company, which had been organized primarily to carry out the contract of the Western Union in building the new line, was merged with that of the Western Union by an issue of \$3,000,000 of Western Union stock in exchange for its own stock. Within four years the line was abandoned and a new one was constructed along the route of the new railroad.

In 1866 the Western Union purchased a controlling interest in the California State Telegraph Company, which had previously absorbed the Overland Telegraph Company and henceforth all the lines in California became part of the Pacific Division of the great Western Union Telegraph Company. Lines were extended in every direction following the railroad, and it was not long before the state became a net-work of telegraph lines. Bancroft gives the following dates which shows how fast the different cities were connected. Humboldt County was reached in 1864, Portland in 1865, and Mendocino County in 1870. South it was the same; Los Angeles had been reached as early as 1860 by the Atlantic Company; and Santa Barbara and San Diego in 1870.

In considering any history of the telegraph of the western coast mention must be made of the proposed Collins' overland route which drew the attention of the world to this section of the country as the connecting link of a line that would circle the globe. Submarine cables had been laid between short distances and attempts been made to even cross the Atlantic, but very few people had any faith in the ultimate success of the work of Cyrus Field. With the completion of the line connecting the two coasts in 1861, the agitation began for its extension to the far north, to cross the sea at Behring Strait, a distance of thirty-nine miles with a maximum depth of one hundred sixty feet, and thence to connect with a great trunk line from Asiatic Russia which was to extend over the entire eastern world, south to China and India and east to the British Isles.

*Taken from the War Diary of David Homer Bates, Lincoln's private telegrapher, 1861-1865. "Oct. 25, 1861. Received the first message today from California."

Its instigator and leading spirit in the undertaking was Perry McD. Collins, the American commercial agent to Russia. The Russian government promised to build a line from Moscow to the Pacific, a distance of over seven thousand miles and began the construction of the line. Other important routes were also mapped out in Asia and plans made to start the work at once.

In our country the California State Telegraph Company was constructing its line north from San Francisco through Oregon and Washington to Vancouver. The distance yet to be covered to Behring Strait via Sitka was 1800 miles through an unknown wilderness of thickly wooded territory.

The plans to finish this construction of the Russian-American Telegraph were formally submitted to the Western Union Telegraph Company September 28, 1863, and again March 16, 1864. In the letter, Mr. Collins offered to transfer his rights and privileges of certain valuable grants which he had obtained, if the company would undertake the building of the line from the Columbia River to the mouth of the Amoor River in China. The offer was accepted by the company and 20,000 shares of special stock, called extension stock, valued at \$100 each, was issued. The stock found ready sale and was soon all taken up, mostly by the members of the Western Union itself. The work, which was to be completed within two years, began with sanguine hopes in 1865.

Surveys were made by a well-known electrician, Frank L. Pope, who succeeded after a long, hard trip in reaching Behring Sea and mapping out the route to be taken. It was due north to the mouth of the Stekine River, 57 degrees north; from there inland along the foot-hills to Fort Pelly; then along the waters of the Yukon and Kvitchpack Rivers to Behring Sea. Work progressed very rapidly. In a few months the line was completed as far north as 55 degrees north to the mouth of the Skeena River, a distance of 850 miles. A Russian, Serge Abasca, in the services of the Western Union, was sent to the Asiatic coast to survey and map out the line from Behring Sea to the mouth of the Amoor River and steps were being taken to begin the work at once.

There was great enthusiasm everywhere. Mr. Reid says in his book, "The holders of the Russian extension stock as they read and reread these glowing accounts of the work being done felt themselves to be the happiest and most fortunate of mortals. To them the birds on every tree sang of gold." But the work came to a sudden stop. When the news came that the Atlantic cable was at last an assured fact, that even the lost cable of the last year had been recovered, and that the two continents were speaking to each other, all the stockholders of the Russian-American line realized the folly of carrying the work farther. All knew that the competition

would be too one-sided and all attempts to complete the work were abandoned, even though \$3,000,000 had already been spent in the undertaking. The Western Union assumed the loss and offered to redeem the extension stock by a new issue of bonds. Some denounced this proceeding, but as most of the stockholders of the worthless stock were members of the Western Union, it was allowed to pass, and the great Extension line passed into history.

The history of the telegraph from that day has been one of steady growth. In 1867 Mr. James Gamble who did so much in the construction of the first line in California, became the General Superintendent of the Pacific Division of the Western Union, which included the territory of the entire coast as far west as Utah. He held the position until the early 80's. He was succeeded by his assistant, Mr. Frank Jaynes, who held the position until a few years ago in 1910, when the merger between the Western Union and the Bell Telephone Company took place and the entire system was revised. Mr. C. H. Gaunt is now the head of the entire division.

The local office of the Western Union Telegraph Company has had the same phenomenal growth as the other parts of the city. In the early 70's the office was on Court Street, between Main and Spring, and the manager was Mr. R. R. Haines. Mr. E. A. Beardslee was the next manager, and the office outgrew its old quarters and moved to the corner of First and Spring. Twelve years ago Mr. Ralph Miller took charge of the work in Los Angeles, and with the trend of the city to the south the office was moved to its present location on Spring Street near Sixth. In 1910 Mr. S. A. Lawrence succeeded Mr. Miller, and he is now the manager of the Los Angeles office.

San Francisco has the largest office in the state. It has twenty-one branch offices, 421 employees, operators, clerks, etc., and messengers. In the state there are 27,410 miles of wire, 791 offices and 1977 employees.*

The only other telegraph company which has ever become a factor in the state is the Postal Telegraph Company. Mr. Albert B. Chandler, a well-known man in telegraph circles was its promoter, backed largely by the wealth of John Mackey. It was built in the 80's. It gets its strength and has been able to compete with the Western Union because of its cables, especially those of the west, for it is the only company which is connected with the Orient. The Pacific Cable was completed between San Francisco and Honolulu Christmas Eve, 1902, and finished to Manila July 4, 1903.

*Letter of Mr. Frank Lamb, Assistant Superintendent of the Pacific Division of the Western Union Telegraph Company under Mr. Frank Jaynes.